

# FY 2016 Social Innovation Fund Pay for Success Cooperative Agreement

## Writing Meaningful Comments: Guidance and Examples and Sentence Starters

### Standards for a High-Quality Panel Consensus Form (PCF) and Applicant Feedback

The comments from the PCFs help with panel discussions, serve as the documentation of the assessment, and are used to provide to applicants as feedback from the review process. The comments may also be released to the public in response to official Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. The completeness and quality of these comments, as well as the alignment between Ratings and comments are extremely important. As such, they must be appropriate, useful, and clearly correspond with the Selection Criteria elements that Reviewers were asked to assess. Provided below is guidance on *writing meaningful comments* and some example *sentence starters* to help construct helpful comments.

### Writing Meaningful Comments

- Limit the assessment to information that was found in the reviewed application. Do not include information from outside sources, the applicant's known reputation; or compare the application to another applicant, etc.
  - Present evaluative language instead of a summary of details from the application. Provide overall thoughts about the proposal. Give an assessment of what is strong or weak about the application, how this detail makes it strong, and how well the information that the applicant included responded to the requirements.
  - Phrase deficiencies in the application appropriately.
  - Avoid making suggestions for improvement and do not tell the applicant what would have made the proposal better. Rather phrase what was lacking, and how this lacking affected the proposal.
  - Comment is evaluative and appropriate with no suggestions for a "better proposal" No inflammatory or inappropriate statements
  - Exercise care in articulating the assessment. Do not ask questions in the comments; avoid harsh tones, or overly broad statements. Do not refer to the "grant writer" for the application, etc. Below are examples of inappropriate comments:
    - Why did the applicant not respond to the majority of the Criteria?
    - The training plan was virtually non-existent.
    - The applicant never clearly stated who the target population was!
    - The grant writer was slick and creative, but there was little substance to the proposal. Sentences are complete, with correct grammar and spelling.
  - Use spell check, and reread the assessment after you have completed it to ensure that it is clear and well written.
  - Comments address the Selection Criteria only, and do not comment on random aspects of the proposal.
  - Comments should be limited to the strengths and weaknesses of the application, and should indicate the selection criteria it speaks to. Take care to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses do not contradict each other. If there are strong and weak aspects of a Criterion that you would like to comment on, phrase the comment appropriately.
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- The selected Ratings must be aligned with the comments provided for each section

#### ***Characteristics of High Quality Comments***

- Keep comments focused on significant strengths and weaknesses (that have an impact on the selected Rating).
  - A strength becomes significant when it shows that the applicant has clearly demonstrated both an understanding of, and the ability to address, a key issue in program implementation or management.
  - A weakness becomes significant when a criterion is not addressed at all, or is addressed poorly causing concern about the applicant's ability to successfully implement the proposed project.
- Significant strengths and weaknesses must relate to the Selection Criteria as specified in the Notice and described in the PCF Guidance Document.
- The difference is clear between comments based on fact and those based on professional judgment. (Both are helpful, but the distinction is necessary.)
- Comments include evidence or an evaluation, rather than a reiteration or summary of what is in the application.

#### ***Characteristics of Low Quality Comments***

- There is little or no relevant information to connect the statement to a particular application. The comment is generic and can be read to apply to any application.
  - Comment includes a large portion of information that was copied directly from the application. There is little or no relevant information to indicate overall quality of the section.
  - The sentence is long and confusing, so that the assessment is altogether unclear.
  - There is little documentation or no evidence provided about what was strong/weak, or how it was good/bad.
  - Comments are ambiguous and not clearly related to the Selection Criteria.
  - Comments contain judgments that are outside the scope of responsibility of the Reviewer (for example, commenting that the program has received more than its fair share of funding).
  - Comments contain questions, page numbers, suggestions or recommendations for improvements. Comments are facetious, pejorative, or otherwise inappropriate or unprofessional.
  - Re-stating or summarizing the application.
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#### **Sentence Starters**

The sentence starters below may be useful in forming constructive review comments in the PCFs. Keep in mind that the Sentence Starters are not exclusive statements, and that CNCS is neither prescribing them nor limiting their use. The purpose is to provide Review Participants with resources for a successful review.

- Community needs to be addressed are compelling and well-documented/missing... as evidenced by the following...
  - The target community (does not) appears to have been effectively involved in planning (or implementing) the program in the following way/because...
  - Proposed activities (do not) address the identified needs...to support their assertion that...
  - The applicant demonstrates previous relevant success as evidenced by.../The applicant does not make the case that they have been successful ...
  - The tutoring program includes/does not appear to include the following elements and appears to be thorough/complete/sufficient/well-planned/insufficient/lacking in detail/incomplete, etc...
  - The applicant presents limited information about the need to be addressed...they propose to...but the need was not substantiated because...
  - The applicant presents a clear and feasible/an ambiguous...
  - The applicant has a realistic plan for building the capacity/does not present a plan of the organization and the community to sustain the proposed service activities after the grant ends. Key features of this plan are...
  - The absence of information on... makes it difficult to assess the impact of the program in ...
  - The potential impact of the program on the community is well-demonstrated in the inclusive...
  - The applicant presents a plan to sustain the proposed service activities in the community after the grant ends. Key features of this plan are...
  - This program supported the claim that they are likely to be successful through... The activities proposed reflect a comprehensive program model that...
  - Though the applicant has an innovative approach to...they are lacking... The applicant meets minimal standards in their response, as it was...
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